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THE CONVERSATION

North Africa: small glimmers of light in bid to stop violence against women

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Tunisian women marking International Women's Day. The country scores poorly when it comes to women's safety. EPA/Mohamed Messara

North Africa holds the dubious "honour" of being among the world's worst regions for gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment and violence against women.

In 2012 Moroccan teen Amina Filali's suicide made international headlines. She killed herself after being forced to marry her rapist. A full 99.3% of Egyptian women have encountered sexual harassment. Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt and Morocco rank 123rd, 126th, 129th, and 133rd out of 142 in the World Economic Forum's 2014 Global Gender Gap's consideration of state resource distribution. And Morocco and Egypt are in the bottom two-fifths of the United

Nations Development Program's Gender Inequality Index.

The United Nations' International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women calls attention to the continued need for work on its 1993 declaration.

The stories and statistics paint a bleak picture, and a great deal is yet to be done. The sad reality is that the world is generally not safe for women. But some local projects in North Africa provide a glimpse of hope and suggest a way forward.

Harnessing modern and ancient practices

Many women in water-poor regions travel long distances to fetch water, often in dangerous areas and under threat of violence if the chore is not completed satisfactorily. Too frequently, though, programmes seeking to ease this burden for women fail to consider that time away from the house may also be an *escape* from household labour and domestic abuse. Importantly, it gives women an opportunity to be in women-only spaces.

And being resource gatekeepers is a source of power. Managing food, water, and other natural resources is one of the few ways women may be able to materially exert their agency.

One local non-governmental organisation in Morocco is building women's empowerment into their development projects by considering these issues from the very start. Dar Si Hmad's fog project combines modern technology and an ancient practice to harvest potable water from the fog that drifts over the Anti-Atlas Mountains. Recognising women's privileged ancestral role as water guardians, the project has also enhanced women's technology capabilities so they can report data and monitor their water system via SMS message.

Reliable taps have been installed which means that women in Amazigh villages now no longer have to walk five kilometres at 4am to fill containers of water. To ensure the women are able to continue having conversations that used to occur near the wells, Dar Si Hmad is pursuing other avenues. In female-focused spaces with local facilitators, rural women explore projects such as argan co-ops as routes to economic empowerment and personal satisfaction.

Cartoons for commuters

The bustling streets of Cairo are at first glance a polar opposite to rural Morocco. Yet the daily dilemmas faced by women in both areas are eerily familiar: the constant critique of clothing, the fear of leaving the house alone, the likelihood of being catcalled, even in groups.

In Cairo, Nihal Saad Zaghloul founded *Bassma*, The Imprint Movement, three years ago in an effort to rebuild the city as a safe space free of discrimination and violence. She was spurred into action after watching helplessly while her friend was sexually assaulted in the middle of Egypt's Tahrir Square. This was something all too common in the iconic home of the 2011 uprisings.

The initiative's most recent project uses cartoons to challenge commuters in Cairo's busiest metro stations. Artist Ahmed Nady's scenes depict the everyday moments of sexual harassment against Egyptian women. The cartoons force people to see and consider what these seemingly small acts actually mean.

The storytelling power of drawing is used to make people stop and think rather than shrug off a tagline or statistic. The colourful panels are intended to make people in the heart of their

commute – one of the most likely times for harassment and assault – see how their behaviour impedes women's right to do something as simple as shopping for food.

The comic campaign asks commuters a question: "What Will You Do?". This is a direct call to action.

Locally initiated and informed projects such as these are vital to the prevention of violence against women through sustained education, empowerment and security.

These local efforts are supported by global initiatives like the UN's UNiTE to End Violence against Women campaign, which calls for #16days of attention to violence against women. During this period scholars, activists, policymakers, and communities will work toward a world free from violence against women.

As *Bassma* says:

Sexual harassment doesn't harm her alone, it harms us all.

Violence against women is everybody's problem. It will take everybody to solve it. Together, local projects and global attention can make violence against women a thing of the past.



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Tahrir Square

Sexual harassment

Sexism

North Africa

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